White Paper Report

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Project Title: The Journalism History Hub

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A. Project Activities

The Journalism History Hub, renamed the Media History Exchange (MHX), is an innovative, multifunctional scholarly communications platform that provides a digital archive, social network, conference manager and collaborative workspace for researchers and students interested in the history of journalism and mass communication. The scholarly community that addresses problems and issues in journalism and communication history is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing researchers from disciplines such as history; English and law; the humanistic social sciences such as sociology, political science, and psychology; the journalism and mass communication academy itself; and practitioners. The MHX provides a contemporary vehicle for these scholars to interact with each other.

During the grant period, a board of advisors with representatives from several different academic communities associated with the study of journalism history, as well as technical experts in archiving and digital architectures, was created. The board of advisors, led by Dr. Elliot King, defined the general scope of the site. Dr. Kirk Brattkus, an independent technology developer, managed technical development. During the development of the pilot project, the board of advisors met four times over the course of two years to provide input and direction and to develop baseline policies governing the use of the MHX.

B. Accomplishments

The pilot project is currently running at www.mediahistoryexchange.org. The MHX has more than 240 members from around the world. Its archive contains more than 10,000 items, including 140 conference abstracts and nearly 100 research papers and other kinds of scholarly materials. In addition, the MHX's social networking tools allow researchers to extend their interdisciplinary academic community by creating extensive profiles that detail contact information, academic associations, fields of expertise, research interests, publications (linked to content uploaded to the MHX by the members), and upcoming meetings. Content is tagged with a taxonomy that connects the content to member interests. Membership in the MHX continues to grow steadily, as does the amount of archived material and the use of the platform for communication.

Certain baseline policies have been developed. The site is free, but membership is by invitation only. People can request a membership from the site homepage and that membership request must be approved. Any existing member can approve a request for membership. Because of copyright and rules governing academic publishing, at this point, the site is not open to the world or searchable by Google or other public search services. Work posted in the MHX archive is not considered to be published; it is just being shared by a community of colleagues.

The MHX has been used by five interdisciplinary conferences to one degree or another. The Joint Journalism and Communication History Conference uses it to completely manage its conference. The Research Society for Victorian Periodicals used it to manage

their peer-review process. The Symposium on the 19th Century Press and the Civil War and an ad hoc research project, `Exploring the language of the popular in Anglo-American newspapers 1833-1988,' funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, used it to archive papers and abstracts. The International Literary Journalism Studies Association used it primarily to publicize its conference.

The MHX has been formally presented at the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), as well as the Council of Division at the AEJMC. After that presentation, other divisions of the AEJMC expressed an interest in using the technology for their subject areas. If the project moves beyond the prototype stages, other divisions will be instructed as to how to incorporate the platform into their activities.

The MHX has taken two key steps towards sustainability. First, the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication has agreed to provide maintenance funding for the site for the next two years. Second, several universities have expressed an interest in permanently hosting the MHX.

C. Audience

The Media History Exchange is geared to the scholarly community doing research into the history of journalism and mass communication. This community is not well-served by major disciplinary national conferences and journals and, instead, relies heavily on smaller interdisciplinary conferences for communication. The membership in the MHX grew steadily over the grant period. Increases in membership are primarily driven by its use as a conference manager for the Joint Journalism and Communication History Conference each March. Between conferences, membership grows via word of mouth. However, the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication has agreed to publicize the MHX to its membership, which should add several hundred members.

With a conference management component, the MHX was intended to support the activities of the small, interdisciplinary conferences in the field. The MHX has been used most extensively by the Joint Journalism and Communication History Conference. Over the two years of use, while not solely directly attributable to the use of the MHX, attendance at the conference has increased 25 percent. The MHX has enabled the conference managers to accommodate the growth without having to recruit additional personnel.

D. Evaluation

The MHX was evaluated in two ways. Midway through the project, a digital media architect from Yale University evaluated the user interface for the site and generated a comprehensive checklist of what needed to be improved. NEH Funding allowed for about 80 percent of the issues to be corrected.

The second and more important measure was the use of the site itself. While no benchmarks were established in the grant proposal, attracting 240 plus members to the site (out of a total universe of perhaps 1500 researchers) was in line with expectations. Unanticipated usage issues prevented more conference papers from being posted, but archiving more than 100 conference papers and abstracts can be understood as a positive proof of concept. Members are willing to archive their papers if the archiving process is easy enough and there are incentives to do so. Also, the variety of methods that people would want to use to post papers was not anticipated. It was envisioned that conference participants would post their own papers, but in the case of several conferences, the conference organizer preferred to post them. Although possible to do, this required a lot of guidance from the system administrator.

Finally, the use of the MHX as a platform for members to communicate with each between conferences or to collaborate on projects did not take off. The MHX was primarily used before and immediately after associated conferences were being organized, but not between conferences.

E. Continuation of the Project

The MHX definitely will be continued. Two collaborative projects designed to give people incentives to the MHX between conferences are being launched. The first will allow members to build an annotated bibliography of books, articles, and videos related to the field. The second project will allow conference organizers and others to collect and post conference papers. Both of these projects are intended to increase the usage between conferences, as well as provide reasons for scholars to join the exchange.

Currently the MHX has attracted several thousand dollars a year in ongoing support and is negotiating with several universities to host the site and provide technical support.

F. Long-Term Impact

The world of scholarly communication continues to be in great turmoil. The MHX has demonstrated real progress as a communications platform that can potentially serve interdisciplinary communities. If the proposed collaborations are successful, the MHX could emerge as a destination site and focal point media and communication historians.

G. Lessons Learned and Lessons Unanswered

Despite the promise of open source software (Drupal), working in open source has many problems. Modules developed by the Drupal community would not always work correctly. In one instance, mistakes were introduced into the MHX when somebody in the open source community altered an underlying module. Moreover, expertise in Drupal is not as widespread as anticipated and commercial Drupal developers command high prices.

Second, the interface is a critical component for people to be able to use the site without support from a system administrator. Since, at this stage, we had to focus on developing the underlying functionality, the interface was not simple or intuitive enough. Even with step-by-step instructions spelled out, people had problems navigating through the MHX features. The platform still requires too much "hand holding" and support.

The MHX is a peer-to-peer social network. Any member can revise the site, but many of the members did not understand the concept of a peer-to-peer social network or some of the other terminology used. Indeed, the computer literacy among the members was much lower than anticipated.

The main unanswered question is whether people actually want to communicate with each other. It may be that episodic communication through conference and journals is all the communication platforms this community needs. As a prototype, it is too early to judge. However, it is already clear that for the MHX to emerge as a viable new platform for scholarly communication, a significant amount of training and promotion will be required.